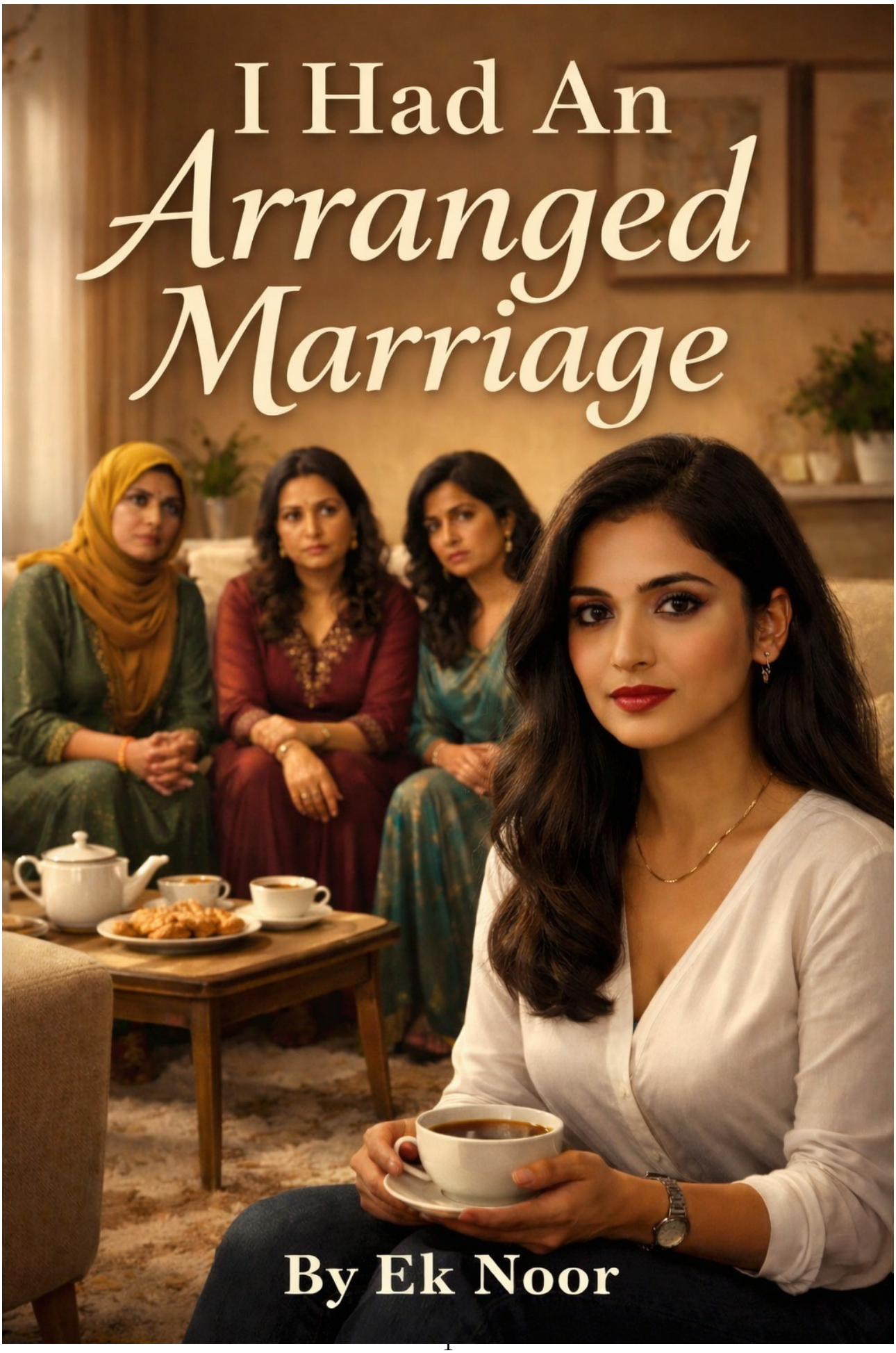
I Had An
Arranged
Marriage
By Ek Noor

Title: I Had An Arranged Marriage

By Ek Noor

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ek.noor@outlook.com

Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. Characters and events are imagined. The play explores patterns of behaviour that can arise within close-knit communities. It is not intended to represent any single family, culture, religion, or group, but reflects experiences shaped by proximity, expectation, and belonging.

CHARACTER LIST

NIKKI (mid-30s) British Asian woman. Married to a successful white British man. Financially secure, emotionally grounded.

SONIA (early to mid-50s) British Asian woman. Had an arranged marriage in her early 20s. Socially respected, materially comfortable.

FARAH (early to mid-40s) British Asian woman. Arranged marriage to a generally kind but emotionally limited man.

MAYA (late 40s to early-50s) British Asian woman. Had an arranged marriage. Deeply invested in reputation, propriety, and communal order.

IMRAN (early to mid-40s) British Asian man. Had an arranged marriage. Outwardly modern, inwardly threatened. Husband of FARAH.

Mr GUPTA (late 50s to early-60s) British Asian man. Husband of SONIA. Community elder.

ACT ONE - “GETTING TO KNOW NIKKI”

Scene 1 - *Coffee*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Carefully curated. Neutral tones. A space designed to look welcoming but reveal nothing personal.*

(Morning. SONIA is arranging a coffee tray with quiet precision. FARAH sits neatly on the sofa. MAYA adjusts a cushion that doesn’t need adjusting.)

SONIA*:* *(mild, managerial)* Milk on the side. Sugar separate. Everyone says they don’t take sugar...then they do.

FARAH: That’s because sugar is shame now. Everything nice is shame now.

MAYA: *(smiling tightly)* Speak for yourself. I don’t need sugar.

SONIA: Of course you don’t.

(A beat. SONIA glances at the clock. She’s ready.)

FARAH: So… she’s coming?

SONIA: Yes. I met her properly in M&S. Very polite. Very put-together.

MAYA: Too put-together.

SONIA: MAYA…

MAYA: What? I’m just saying. Some women do “polite” like it’s a strategy.

FARAH: Or armour.

SONIA: Today stays pleasant. She’s Desi. She’s new. We don’t make things uncomfortable.

(Doorbell.)

SONIA: That’ll be her.

(SONIA exits. FARAH and MAYA exchange a quick, knowing look.)

MAYA: *(low)* She married a white man, right?

FARAH: That’s what you said.

MAYA: Not me. SONIA.

FARAH: You asked first.

(SONIA re-enters with NIKKI. NIKKI is warm, composed, slightly guarded in the way people are when they want to be liked.)

SONIA: NIKKI, come in. Shoes on or off...whatever you're comfortable with.

NIKKI: Shoes off is fine. SONIA, thank you very much for inviting me.

(NIKKI notices FARAH and MAYA.)

NIKKI: *(pleasantly surprised)* Oh...hi. I didn't realise…

SONIA: *(smiling wider)* Just a small coffee. You know how it is. We all needed a break.

FARAH: Hi, NIKKI. I'm FARAH.

MAYA: MAYA. Lovely to meet you.

(They exchange polite smiles. Quick scans. Subtle measurements.)

NIKKI: Lovely to meet you both.

(SONIA guides NIKKI to a single armchair opposite the sofa... the most visible seat.)

SONIA: Sit. Coffee? Or tea? We do both.

NIKKI: Coffee's great, thank you.

(SONIA pours carefully.)

SONIA: So… you work from home?

NIKKI: Mostly, yes.

MAYA: Must be nice.

NIKKI: It helps. I run my business online, so I can be flexible.

FARAH: What kind of business?

NIKKI: Consultancy. Healthcare systems.

SONIA: Impressive. Very… current.

MAYA: And your husband...what does he do?

(A polite pause. NIKKI answers easily.)

NIKKI: He’s in Business Development. Travels a lot.

FARAH: Busy.

NIKKI: It works for us.

(NIKKI tries to turn the focus outward.)

NIKKI: How do you all know each other?

SONIA: Oh, you know. Community. Children. Life.

MAYA: Everyone knows everyone.

(Nothing given back.)

NIKKI: Right.

SONIA: And your family...where are they based?

NIKKI: Up north.

MAYA: So it’s just you and him here?

NIKKI: Yes.

SONIA: That must be very… free.

(The word lands.)

NIKKI: *(smiles)* It’s peaceful.

MAYA: Mmm.

FARAH: So how did you two meet?

NIKKI: University.

SONIA: Love marriage.

NIKKI: Yes.

MAYA: Your parents were fine with that?

NIKKI: Yes, once they met him.

SONIA: Lucky.

NIKKI: Yes! Fortunate.

(NIKKI tries again to connect.)

NIKKI: Do you meet often?

SONIA: It’s important. Women need women.

FARAH: Support.

MAYA: Community.

(A practiced chorus.)

NIKKI: *(relieved)* I love that.

(A shared glance... approval, but conditional.)

SONIA: No children yet?

(A fraction too soon.)

NIKKI: Not yet.

MAYA: By choice?

NIKKI: Yes.

SONIA: In our culture, time doesn’t wait. It collects interest.

(FARAH intervenes.)

FARAH: SONIA just means everyone has opinions.

NIKKI: *(laughing politely)* I’ve met aunties.

MAYA: We’re not aunties.

(A pause.)

SONIA: Older sisters.

(A soft laugh. Reset.)

SONIA: Another coffee?

NIKKI: No thank you.

SONIA: You’re very slim.

(NIKKI stills... then recovers.)

NIKKI: I’m fine, thank you.

(A beat. The questions resume gently. Persistently.)

(Lights dim)

Scene 2 - *Another Coffee*

Setting: *SONIA's lounge. Morning again. Everything looks exactly the same, except the biscuits are different.*

(SONIA is already seated this time. FARAH pours coffee. MAYA scrolls on her phone).

FARAH: She always looks happy, maybe because of her relationship?

MAYA: *(puts the phone away)* Hmmm….

(Doorbell rings and SONIA answers the door.)

SONIA: *(smiling, practiced)* NIKKI! Come in. You're right on time.

NIKKI: *(lightly)* I try. I had a call earlier but I wrapped it up.

MAYA: Already working? *(shakes head)* I'd forget how to relax.

NIKKI: *(smiles)* I like being busy.

(SONIA gestures to the same chair as before. NIKKI hesitates...just a fraction...then sits.)

FARAH: Coffee?

NIKKI: Yes please.

(FARAH pours.)

SONIA: We were just saying how lucky we are to have these mornings.

MAYA: Not everyone can just… work from home.

NIKKI: It took a while to build.

SONIA: Of course. Nothing good comes easy.

(A beat. SONIA tilts her head, studying NIKKI...kindly.)

SONIA: You look well.

NIKKI: Thank you.

MAYA: You always do.

(The compliment hangs...not warm, not hostile.)

FARAH: So how does your day usually work? With your husband travelling and all.

NIKKI: We plan around it. I like my routines.

MAYA: Doesn’t it get lonely?

NIKKI: Sometimes. But I enjoy my own company.

SONIA: That’s a modern thing.

NIKKI: *(smiles)* Or just a human thing.

(SONIA smiles back...approving, but faintly warning.)

NIKKI: What about you, FARAH? Do you work?

(FARAH opens her mouth…)

SONIA: FARAH used to. Before the children.

FARAH: Yes, I…

MAYA: It’s different once you have responsibilities.

(FARAH closes her mouth.)

NIKKI: Oh. Right.

SONIA: Your parents must miss you.

NIKKI: We talk often.

MAYA: They’re okay with… everything?

NIKKI: They had to be.

SONIA: Some parents never adjust.

FARAH: That’s true.

MAYA: And then children suffer.

(NIKKI blinks. She wasn’t answering that question.)

NIKKI: I’d love to hear how you all managed it. You know...expectations.

(A pause. Too personal. Too direct.)

SONIA: *(smiling)* We didn’t manage. We accepted.

MAYA: That’s the difference.

FARAH: Acceptance is peace.

(They say it like doctrine.)

NIKKI: I’m still learning that.

SONIA: You will.

MAYA: Just be careful.

NIKKI: About?

MAYA: *(indefinite shrug)* Life.

FARAH: People talk.

SONIA: Not here. But outside.

NIKKI: *(smiling politely)* They always do.

NIKKI: Do you ever meet in the evenings? Maybe dinner sometime?

(Too eager. Too equal.)

SONIA: Mornings are easier.

MAYA: Evenings are family time.

FARAH: Mornings are… neutral.

(Neutral. The word lands.)

NIKKI: Of course.

SONIA: No children yet, right?

NIKKI: Not yet.

MAYA: You don’t want to wait too long.

NIKKI: We’ll see.

SONIA: Women like us don’t get infinite chances.

NIKKI: *(warm, firm)* I’m okay with my choices.

(A micro-pause. The room absorbs this.)

FARAH: She’s confident.

MAYA: Confidence fades.

(SONIA intervenes quickly.)

SONIA: Confidence changes. That's all.

NIKKI: I should head off soon. I've got another call.

MAYA: Already?

FARAH: You're always busy.

SONIA: *(smiling)* We won't keep you.

(But the tone suggests; we noticed.)

NIKKI: I really enjoyed this. *(She means it... and that's the tragedy.)*

SONIA: We'll do it again.

MAYA: Yes. Soon.

(NIKKI gathers her bag. As she reaches the door…)

SONIA: Same time next week?

(A beat.)

NIKKI: Sure.

(She exits.)

(After NIKKI leaves.)

(A silence. Not hostile. Evaluative.)

MAYA: She talks a lot.

FARAH: She listens too.

SONIA: She doesn’t realise how visible she is.

FARAH: She always looks happy.

(Lights dim.)

Scene Three - *The Pattern*

Setting: SONIA’s lounge. Morning. Same light. Same layout. The coffee tray is already out... waiting.

(SONIA and FARAH are seated. MAYA stands by the chair, looking as if checking something. The doorbell rings.)

SONIA: Right on time.

(She doesn’t move immediately. FARAH does.)

FARAH: I’ll get it.

(FARAH opens the door. NIKKI enters…,friendly, but more cautious now. She’s learned something, though she doesn’t yet know what.)

NIKKI: Morning.

FARAH: Morning! Come in.

(They exchange a brief hug...friendly, but not intimate. NIKKI steps in. MAYA turns around.)

MAYA: You always look so fresh in the mornings.

NIKKI: *(smiles)* Thank you.

(SONIA gestures to the same chair. Again. NIKKI notices this time.)

(A beat. NIKKI sits.)

SONIA: Coffee?

NIKKI: Yes please.

(SONIA pours.)

SONIA: How's work?

NIKKI: Busy.

MAYA: Busy is good.

FARAH: Busy means successful.

SONIA: Success can be lonely.

(NIKKI nods. She's learning not to elaborate.)

NIKKI: Did you do anything nice over the weekend?

(A pause. Not the expected direction.)

SONIA: We keep weekends for family

MAYA: Children don’t wait.

FARAH: There’s always something to do.

(NIKKI clocks it. No stories. No detail.)

NIKKI: Of course.

SONIA: Your husband’s away again?

NIKKI: Yes. Back later today.

MAYA: Does he travel a lot?

NIKKI: Quite a bit.

MAYA: And you’re fine with that?

NIKKI: Yes.

SONIA: Some women wouldn’t be.

NIKKI: Some women are different.

(A small silence. FARAH shifts.)

FARAH: It’s good you have work. Otherwise you might feel… disconnected.

NIKKI: I have friends.

MAYA: Not like this.

(The word “this” lands.)

NIKKI: MAYA, you mentioned your children last time...how old are they?

(MAYA opens her mouth…)

SONIA: They’re at that age where everything needs managing.

MAYA: Yes. That age.

(Again, NIKKI is blocked.)

(NIKKI begins to withdraw...visibly. Sits back slightly, stops smiling. The women notice.)

SONIA: Are you tired?

NIKKI: A little.

MAYA: You should slow down.

NIKKI: I’m okay.

SONIA: We worry. You don’t have anyone here to look after you.

(That lands harder than anything else so far.)

NIKKI: I look after myself.

FARAH: *(smiling, too quickly)* She’s very capable.

MAYA: That’s what worries me.

(SONIA cuts in.)

SONIA: We’re only saying… life changes women.

NIKKI: Yes. It does.

NIKKI: I won’t stay long today. I’ve got a meeting.

MAYA: Again?

FARAH: You’re always rushing.

SONIA: *(smiling, but firm)* We don’t get many mornings together.

NIKKI: I know. I appreciate it.

(She stands. This time, she doesn’t apologise.)

SONIA: Next time, stay longer.

MAYA: Yes. You’ll feel more… settled.

FARAH: We like having you here.

(NIKKI pauses at the door.)

NIKKI: Thank you for the coffee.

(She exits.)

(Silence. Longer this time.)

MAYA: She’s changing.

FARAH: Or noticing.

SONIA: She doesn’t understand what this is yet.

MAYA: She thinks she has a choice.

(SONIA looks at the empty chair.)

SONIA: Everyone thinks that at first.

(Lights dim.)

ACT TWO - “CONTAINMENT”

Scene 1 - *Before She Arrives*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Morning. Same room. But the coffee tray is messier, less ceremony, more ownership.*

(SONIA is pouring coffee. FARAH sits, scrolling her phone. MAYA leafs through a magazine. There is no rush.)

SONIA: She’s late.

FARAH: She’s never late.

MAYA: People like her don’t run late. They *arrive*.

(FARAH looks up.)

FARAH: What does that mean?

MAYA: You know exactly what it means.

(A pause. SONIA places the coffee pot down deliberately.)

SONIA: Let’s not start like that.

MAYA: I’m not starting anything. I’m just noticing.

FARAH: Noticing what?

MAYA: That she doesn’t try. And yet everything fits her.

(FARAH frowns slightly.)

FARAH: She tries. Just… differently.

MAYA: No. Trying looks like effort. She looks like she woke up correct.

(SONIA intervenes, calm.)

SONIA: Some women carry themselves easily.

MAYA: Exactly.

(Beat.)

MAYA: Did you see her last time? No makeup. No jewellery. Still...*(shakes head)* Men notice that.

FARAH: Why are we talking about men?

MAYA: Because that's how the world works.

SONIA: MAYA…

MAYA: I'm just being honest. You think her husband doesn't see it? You think other men don't?

(FARAH shifts, uncomfortable.)

FARAH: She's married.

MAYA: So are we.

(Silence.)

SONIA: She married for love.

FARAH: So?

MAYA: So she never learnt restraint.

FARAH: That's not fair.

MAYA: Isn't it? She chose him. He chose her. No negotiations. No elders. No warnings.

(She laughs...short, humourless.)

MAYA: That kind of confidence comes from being chosen first.

SONIA: Different paths teach different lessons.

MAYA: Yes. Our path taught survival.

FARAH: And hers taught freedom?

MAYA: Don’t make it sound noble.

(FARAH looks down at her hands.)

MAYA: Tell me honestly...(*only to FARAH*) Do you ever look at her and think… *if I’d waited*?

(FARAH stiffens.)

FARAH: That’s not a fair question.

MAYA: It’s the real one.

(A silence too long.)

FARAH: I think… she doesn’t know how lucky she is.

MAYA: Thank you.

(SONIA watches this exchange closely. This is the fracture point.)

SONIA: She doesn’t understand how visible she is.

FARAH: She’s not trying to be.

MAYA: That’s worse.

FARAH: Why?

MAYA: Because it means she thinks she doesn’t have to.

(SONIA nods slightly. Not agreement, recognition.)

SONIA: We need to be careful.

MAYA: Careful of what?

SONIA: Of envy dressing itself up as concern.

(MAYA bristles.)

MAYA: This isn’t envy. This is… instinct.

FARAH: Instinct for what?

MAYA: For imbalance.

MAYA: She comes here. She sits in this room. She listens to our lives. Our compromises. And then she goes back to her quiet house and her flexible job and her husband who lets her…

FARAH: ….supports her.

MAYA: Whatever you want to call it.

(SONIA raises a hand.)

SONIA: She doesn’t owe us anything.

(A beat.)

MAYA: Doesn’t she?

(That lands.)

MAYA: We stayed.

(Silence.)

FARAH: MAYA…

MAYA: We stayed. We didn’t run when it got hard. We didn’t choose comfort over duty.

(SONIA looks at her carefully.)

SONIA: Careful.

MAYA: Why? Because she might hear?

(They all glance instinctively toward the door.)

FARAH: She’s different.

SONIA: Yes.

MAYA: And difference needs… context.

(SONIA doesn't answer immediately. Then…)

SONIA: Let's just keep things… balanced.

(The doorbell rings.)

(All three adjust instantly, faces reset, bodies soften.)

FARAH: That'll be her.

SONIA: *(smiling already)* Of course.

(They take their seats. Coffee cups lifted. The room returns to warmth.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 2 - *The Shift*

Setting: *SONIA's lounge. Morning. The coffee is poured already. The room is reset, but not neutral.*

(SONIA, FARAH, and MAYA are seated when the doorbell rings. They exchange a quick glance...practiced.)

SONIA: *(smiling immediately)* That'll be NIKKI.

(FARAH rises, opens the door. NIKKI enters, warm but noticeably more contained than before.)

NIKKI: Morning.

FARAH: Morning! Come in.

(They exchange a brief hug. It's friendly, but FARAH's grip lingers half a second too long.)

MAYA: You look very… rested.

NIKKI: *(smiles)* I slept well.

(SONIA gestures to the chair. The same one. NIKKI notices. She sits.)

SONIA: Coffee?

NIKKI: Yes please.

(SONIA pours.)

SONIA: Busy morning already?

NIKKI: A bit.

MAYA: Always a bit, with you.

(A small laugh from FARAH, meant to soften.)

FARAH: She's in demand.

MAYA: Lucky her.

MAYA: I wish I could wake up looking like that.

NIKKI: *(smiles, uncertain)* That’s kind of you.

MAYA: It’s just truth.

(Silence. Truth as weapon.)

SONIA: Your husband’s back today, isn’t he?

NIKKI: This afternoon.

MAYA: Do you miss him when he’s away?

NIKKI: Sometimes.

SONIA: Some women wouldn’t cope with that.

NIKKI: Everyone copes differently.

(A beat. FARAH watches closely.)

NIKKI: FARAH, you mentioned your children’s exams last time...how did they go?

(FARAH opens her mouth…)

MAYA: They’re stressful at that age.

SONIA: Children always are.

(FARAH’s answer dissolves. NIKKI clocks it fully this time.)

NIKKI: Right.

MAYA: You must have a lot of time for yourself.

NIKKI: I manage it.

MAYA: I wouldn’t know what to do with that much freedom.

NIKKI: Freedom looks different to everyone.

SONIA: Sometimes freedom is another word for distance.

(That lands harder than intended.)

(NIKKI begins to withdraw, visibly. folds her hands, smile falters. Women feel the shift.)

FARAH: You’ve gone quiet.

NIKKI: Just listening.

MAYA: Listening to what?

NIKKI: *(smiles politely)* Everyone.

(An awkward beat.)

SONIA: We only worry because we care.

NIKKI: I know.

MAYA: We’ve seen women like you before.

(Too far.)

NIKKI: Like me?

MAYA: Independent. Confident. *(pauses)* Temporary.

(The room stills. FARAH inhales sharply.)

FARAH: MAYA…

SONIA: *(intervening)* What MAYA means is...life humbles us all.

NIKKI: *(smiling, but firm)* Life teaches different lessons.

(A pause. The politeness is straining now.)

NIKKI: I might head off a little early today. I’ve got a call.

MAYA: Already?

FARAH: (*disappointed)* We’ve barely started.

SONIA: *(studying NIKKI)* You always seem to be leaving.

(NIKKI meets her gaze. Calm.)

NIKKI: I always have work.

MAYA: Must be nice to choose that.

(Silence….)

NIKKI: *(gently)* We all choose different things.

(She stands. No apology.)

SONIA: We'll see you next time.

MAYA: *(smiling tightly)* If you're free.

FARAH: Take care.

(NIKKI pauses at the door.)

NIKKI: Thanks for the coffee.

(She exits.)

(A beat. The air doesn't reset.)

MAYA: She thinks she's above us.

FARAH: I don't think she knows what she thinks.

SONIA: She's pulling away.

MAYA: Good.

FARAH: Is it?

(SONIA doesn't answer. She pours more coffee.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 3 - *Withdrawal*

Setting: *SONIA's lounge. Morning. The coffee tray is already out. There is an extra cup poured, waiting.*

(SONIA and FARAH sit close together on the sofa. MAYA stands, arms folded. The doorbell rings.)

SONIA: That'll be her.

(FARAH goes to the door. NIKKI enters. She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.)

NIKKI: Morning.

FARAH: Morning. Come in.

(No hug this time. NIKKI notices. She steps into the room.)

MAYA: You're quiet today.

NIKKI: *(smiles)* Just tired.

(SONIA gestures to the same chair. NIKKI sits without comment.)

SONIA: Coffee?

NIKKI: Please.

SONIA: Sugar?

NIKKI: No, thank you.

(SONIA pours. A small pause.)

SONIA: How's work?

NIKKI: Fine.

MAYA: That's it?

NIKKI: *(smiling)* That's it.

(A beat. FARAH shifts.)

FARAH: You used to tell us more.

NIKKI: Did I?

FARAH: *(smiling, uncertain)* I think so.

SONIA: We like knowing how you are.

NIKKI: I'm okay.

MAYA: You don’t seem yourself.

NIKKI: I feel like myself.

SONIA: Sometimes women close off without realising.

NIKKI: Sometimes women listen.

(A small silence.)

FARAH: Is everything all right at home?

NIKKI: Yes.

MAYA: With your husband?

NIKKI: Yes.

SONIA: You know you can talk to us.

NIKKI: *(smiling, calm)* I know.

MAYA: Then why are you being so careful?

NIKKI: Careful?

MAYA: You measure everything you say now.

NIKKI: I think before I speak.

SONIA: That’s not how friends talk.

NIKKI: I didn’t realise we’d agreed on rules.

(A beat. FARAH inhales.)

SONIA: We’re only saying this space is safe.

NIKKI: Safe for what?

(No one answers immediately.)

MAYA: You don’t trust us.

NIKKI: I didn’t say that.

MAYA: You don’t have to.

(SONIA intervenes.)

SONIA: Let’s not turn this into something it isn’t.

NIKKI: I agree.

NIKKI: I like being here. *(pauses)* I just don’t want to be… analysed.

(That word lands.)

FARAH: We’re not analysing you.

MAYA: We’re worried.

SONIA: We care.

NIKKI: *(smiling gently)* I know.

(But she doesn’t soften.)

(They drink their coffee. No one fills the space. Finally…)

NIKKI: I’ll stay a little longer today.

(This surprises them.)

SONIA: Good.

MAYA: See? You just needed to relax.

NIKKI: No.

(A beat.)

NIKKI: I just needed to be quiet.

(That lands harder than anger.)

(NIKKI prepares to leave. She gathers her bag.)

FARAH: Next time, don’t disappear on us.

NIKKI: *(smiling politely)* I'll let you know.

(She stands.)

SONIA: Same time next week?

(A pause.)

NIKKI: I'll see.

(NIKKI exits.)

(Silence. Thicker now.)

MAYA: She's slipping away.

FARAH: Maybe we pushed.

SONIA: She doesn't like being seen.

FARAH: Or judged.

(SONIA looks at the empty chair.)

SONIA: No one likes that.

(Lights dim.)

Scene 4 - *The Early Exit*

Setting: *SONIA's lounge. Morning. The coffee tray is laid out, but rushed this time, a little careless.*

(SONIA and FARAH are already seated. MAYA paces slightly, restless. The doorbell rings.)

SONIA: That'll be NIKKI.

(FARAH goes to the door. NIKKI enters. She's composed, courteous, and already halfway gone.)

NIKKI: Morning.

FARAH: Morning. Come in.

(No hug. Just a nod. NIKKI notices.)

MAYA: You look distracted.

NIKKI: I have a meeting later.

(SONIA gestures to the chair. NIKKI sits, places her bag neatly at her feet...ready.)

SONIA: Coffee?

NIKKI: Yes, thank you. But I won't stay long.

(That lands immediately.)

MAYA: You've only just arrived.

FARAH: We were looking forward to seeing you.

SONIA: *(smiling, but firm)* Sit properly first.

(NIKKI sits back, but doesn't relax.)

SONIA: Everything all right at home?

NIKKI: Yes.

MAYA: Work again?

NIKKI: Yes.

MAYA: Always work.

(A small silence.)

NIKKI: I didn't want to cancel. I just have to leave a bit earlier today.

FARAH: You could have said that earlier.

NIKKI: I just did.

(FARAH doesn't know what to say.)

MAYA: It must be nice...deciding when people matter.

NIKKI: I'm not deciding that.

MAYA: Aren't you?

(The room stills.)

(SONIA intervenes.)

SONIA: MAYA…

MAYA: No, let her answer.

(NIKKI looks at MAYA, not angry, just alert.)

NIKKI: I’m deciding what I can manage.

MAYA: Because you can.

NIKKI: Because I have to.

MAYA: We didn’t have that luxury.

NIKKI: I know.

MAYA: Do you?

NIKKI: Yes.

(A beat. The politeness is gone now.)

FARAH: We’re all just tired today. Let’s not…

MAYA: No. I’m tired of pretending this is normal.

SONIA: Enough.

(SONIA’s authority snaps into place.)

SONIA: NIKKI isn’t doing anything wrong. *(pauses)* But when you join something, you make time for it.

NIKKI: I did make time.

SONIA: Then why are you leaving?

(Silence.)

NIKKI: *(No accusation. Just truth.)* Because I don’t feel comfortable.

MAYA: There it is.

FARAH: Uncomfortable how?

SONIA: We’ve done nothing but welcome you.

NIKKI: I know.

(That unsettles them.)

NIKKI: I appreciate the coffee. I really do. But I need to go. *(She picks up her bag.)*

SONIA: We’ll talk later.

MAYA: (smiling tightly) If you have time.

FARAH: Take care.

(NIKKI pauses at the door.)

NIKKI: I hope you understand.

(No one answers.)

(She exits.)

(Silence. Heavy.)

MAYA: She thinks she’s better than us.

FARAH: I don’t think she knows what she thinks.

SONIA: She crossed a line.

FARAH: Which one?

(SONIA doesn’t answer.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 5 - *The Call*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Late morning. The coffee cups from earlier haven’t been cleared yet.*

(SONIA stands near the chair, phone in hand. FARAH sits on the sofa, distracted but listening. MAYA hovers nearby, pretending not to.)

SONIA: I’ll call her.

FARAH: Maybe give it a day.

MAYA: Why? So she can cool off and decide she doesn't need us?

(SONIA ignores that, and calls. Phone on speaker, not announced.)

(The call connects.)

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Hello?

SONIA: NIKKI, it's SONIA.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Oh...hi, SONIA.

(Her tone is pleasant, but distant.)

SONIA: I just wanted to check in. *(pauses)* You left rather quickly earlier.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Yes. I had a meeting.

SONIA: Of course. *(pauses)* We were worried.

(FARAH winces slightly. MAYA watches SONIA closely.)

SONIA: *(Not a question.)* We're meeting again next week. Same time.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Oh. I don't think I'll be around. *(A diplomatic lie)*

(A beat.)

SONIA: Not around?

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I'll be away.

(FARAH looks at MAYA. MAYA's eyes narrow.)

SONIA: Away?

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Yes. *(pauses, then gently)* I should have mentioned it earlier.

SONIA: How long will you be away? *(A test.)*

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Just a few days. *(It's vague, deliberately.)*

SONIA: We'd love to see you before then.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I don't think I'll manage.

SONIA: You sounded upset earlier.

NIKKI: I wasn't upset. Just… busy.

(FARAH tries to soften (off-phone)).

FARAH: *(quiet, to SONIA)* Maybe she just needs space.

(MAYA rolls her eyes.)

(SONIA reframes the lie as distance.)

SONIA: You know you don't have to pull away from us.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I'm not pulling away.

SONIA: Then why does it feel like you are?

(A pause. NIKKI chooses containment.)

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I should go. I've got another call starting.

SONIA: We'll speak soon.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Yes. Speak soon.

(The line disconnects.)

(Silence.)

MAYA: She lied.

FARAH: Maybe plans changed.

MAYA: No. That was a lie.

(SONIA doesn't deny it.)

SONIA: She didn't feel able to tell the truth.

FARAH: That should tell us something.

MAYA: It tells us she's hiding.

FARAH: Or protecting herself.

(MAYA scoffs.)

SONIA: If she’s stepping back, it’s because she feels judged.

MAYA: She *should*.

FARAH: MAYA…

SONIA: Enough.

(A pause.)

SONIA: We need to be careful now. If she disappears, people will notice.

(That’s the real concern. The shift to strategy)

MAYA: So what do we do?

(SONIA thinks. Then…)

SONIA: We don’t push. *(pauses)* We remind her she belongs.

FARAH: And if she doesn’t want to?

SONIA: Everyone wants to belong.

(MAYA nods.)

(SONIA looks at the phone, then places it face down.)

(Lights dim.)

Scene 6 - *Seen*

Setting: *SONIA's lounge. Late morning. The room feels smaller today.*

(SONIA sits with a notebook open, not writing, just touching the page. FARAH scrolls on the phone. The door opens sharply. MAYA enters, agitated.)

MAYA: She lied.

(FARAH looks up.)

FARAH: Who?

MAYA: NIKKI.

(SONIA lifts her head, composed.)

SONIA: What happened?

MAYA: I just saw her, on the high street. Coffee in hand. Laughing with an English woman.

(A beat.)

FARAH: Maybe she came back early.

MAYA: No. She said she'd be away *all week.*

SONIA: She said a few days.

MAYA: Same thing.

(MAYA paces.)

MAYA: She looked fine. Relaxed. Not “busy.”

FARAH: You don’t know what she was doing.

MAYA: I know she wasn’t where, she said, she would be.

(That lands.)

SONIA: She didn’t want to come.

MAYA: Then she should have said so.

FARAH: She tried.

(MAYA turns to FARAH.)

MAYA: When?

FARAH: When she said she felt uncomfortable.

(Silence.)

MAYA: So she thinks she’s too good for us now.

FARAH: That’s not what…

MAYA: It’s exactly what it is. She comes. She watches. She judges. Then she disappears.

SONIA: She didn’t judge.

MAYA: She didn’t have to. Her life does it for her.

MAYA: We shared ourselves with her.

FARAH: Did we?

(MAYA ignores that.)

MAYA: We let her in. And she just walks away?

SONIA: She doesn’t owe…

(SONIA stops herself. A choice.)

SONIA: She didn’t handle it well.

(That shift matters.)

FARAH: Why does it matter so much?

(MAYA stops pacing.)

MAYA: Because she makes it look easy.

FARAH: Easy to what?

MAYA: To leave.

(Silence.)

SONIA: If people notice she’s pulled away, they’ll talk.

FARAH: People already talk.

MAYA: And they’ll say we drove her out.

(SONIA considers.)

SONIA: Then we don’t let that be the story.

MAYA: We invite her again.

FARAH: She already said no.

SONIA: We make it harder to refuse.

(A beat.)

FARAH: How?

SONIA: We normalise it. No drama. No pressure. Just… routine.

MAYA: And if she lies again?

SONIA: Then we know.

(That’s the surveillance.)

FARAH: And if she doesn’t want this any more?

(SONIA meets her eyes.)

SONIA: Then she makes that choice publicly.

(FARAH understands what that means.)

MAYA: She can’t just disappear.

FARAH: She already has.

(SONIA closes the notebook.)

SONIA: We’ll invite her. One more time.

(Lights dim.)

Scene 7 - *The Last Call*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Afternoon light now. The room feels quieter, stripped back.*

(SONIA stands by the chair with her phone. FARAH sits nearby, tense. MAYA stands, arms crossed.)

SONIA: I’ll try once more.

FARAH: Maybe don’t.

MAYA: Why? She needs to be clear.

(SONIA makes the call. This time the phone is **not** *on speaker.)*

(The call connects.)

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Hello?

SONIA: Hi, NIKKI. It's SONIA.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* Hi.

(Neutral. Not warm, not cold.)

SONIA: We're getting together again tomorrow morning. *(A statement, not an invitation.)*

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I won't be able to make it.

SONIA: All right. Another day then.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I don't think another day will work either.

(A pause. FARAH leans forward.)

SONIA: You sound very busy.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I am.

SONIA: We've missed you. *(That's the hook.)*

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I appreciate that.

SONIA: We didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I know.

SONIA: Then why step away?

(A long pause. NIKKI chooses restraint.)

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I need to.

SONIA: Just drop in. Even briefly.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I won't. *(The first clear refusal.)*

SONIA: Are you upset with us?

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* No.

SONIA: Then what is this?

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* There isn't much in common. It's a boundary. *(That word lands like a door closing.)*

(Silence.)

(SONIA looks at FARAH, then MAYA. They wait.)

SONIA: We thought you valued being part of this, and we like your company.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone) (pauses)* I just won't be part of it like this.

SONIA: You know people will talk. *(A subtle threat.)*

NIKKI: People always do.

NIKKI: *(Voice over phone)* I have an online meeting starting. I need to go.

SONIA: Of course.

NIKKI: Speak to you later.

(The line disconnects.)

(After the call.)

(Silence. No one moves.)

MAYA: She’s escaping.

FARAH: She already has.

SONIA: She’s chosen distance.

MAYA: Because she can.

(The unease settles in.)

FARAH: What if she doesn’t come back?

(SONIA doesn’t answer immediately.)

SONIA: Then she makes herself an example. *(That lands.)*

MAYA: She thinks she’s free.

FARAH: Maybe she is.

(SONIA looks around the room...the same room where everything began.)

SONIA: Freedom always looks lonely from the outside.

(Lights dim.)

ACT THREE - “AFTER”

Scene 1 - *Without Her*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Bank holiday morning. Brighter light. Chairs closer together than before.*

(SONIA is setting out coffee. FARAH sits stiffly. MAYA scrolls on the phone. Doorbell. SONIA opens the door.)

SONIA: Come in, IMRAN. FARAH's here…and Hubby, you forgot the key?

(IMRAN and Mr GUPTA enter. Casual. Comfortable. This is not their first time here.)

Mr GUPTA: Yes.

IMRAN: Morning.

(They sit without being shown where.)

IMRAN: So… she's not coming then.

(A beat.)

SONIA: No.

Mr GUPTA: Busy?

MAYA: Selective.

(FARAH flinches.)

Mr GUPTA: What happened?

SONIA: Nothing dramatic. *(pauses)* She decided to step back.

IMRAN: Of course she did.

FARAH: It wasn't sudden.

IMRAN: It never is with women like that.

(FARAH looks at him.)

FARAH: Like what?

IMRAN: Independent. *(smiles)* Temporary.

(MAYA exhales...relieved.)

Mr GUPTA: She always seemed… confident.

MAYA: Too confident.

SONIA: She didn’t like being questioned.

FARAH: That’s not fair.

(All eyes turn to FARAH.)

Mr GUPTA: Why?

FARAH: Because we did question her.

(A pause.)

Mr GUPTA: People need structure. Especially when they don’t grow up with it.

IMRAN: Exactly. No elders. No checks.

SONIA: She didn’t want guidance.

FARAH: Or judgment.

(IMRAN laughs softly.)

IMRAN: Same thing, sometimes.

MAYA: She thinks because she married well…

Mr GUPTA: White guy, right?

SONIA: Yes.

IMRAN: There it is.

(A beat.)

IMRAN: They all think that’s freedom.

Mr GUPTA: Isn’t it?

IMRAN: Only until it isn’t.

IMRAN: Those men don’t stick around forever.

MAYA: Exactly.

Mr GUPTA: That’s a bit…

IMRAN: ...realistic.

SONIA: We just wanted to help her stay connected.

Mr GUPTA: Some people don’t want community.

MAYA: Because they think they’re above it.

FARAH: Or because they don’t feel safe in it.

(Silence.)

Mr GUPTA: At least we stayed.

(They all exhale.)

IMRAN: That’s the difference. We didn’t run when it got uncomfortable.

MAYA: We adapted.

SONIA: We endured.

(FARAH looks at the empty chair.)

FARAH: What if she just chose differently?

(IMRAN shrugs.)

IMRAN: Choices have consequences.

Mr GUPTA: Examples matter.

(SONIA nods once.)

SONIA: She’ll come back eventually.

MAYA: Or she won’t.

SONIA: Either way…*(pauses)* her story is clear now.

(SONIA pours more coffee.)

SONIA: Same time next Sunday?

Mr GUPTA: Why not.

IMRAN: As long as it’s peaceful.

(They sit. Unified. Certain.)

(Lights fade.)

Scene 2 - *Settled*

Setting: *SONIA’s lounge. Later the same day. Afternoon light. The coffee cups have been replaced. The room feels lived in again, reclaimed.*

(SONIA clears a cup. Mr GUPTA reads something on his phone. IMRAN lounges comfortably. MAYA sits upright. FARAH stands slightly apart.)

IMRAN: She won’t last.

(No one asks who.)

Mr GUPTA: They never do.

MAYA: She thinks she’s different.

SONIA: Everyone does.

(FARAH shifts.)

IMRAN: She’ll come back when it gets hard. They always do.

Mr GUPTA: Or she’ll disappear completely.

SONIA: Either way, she won’t be our problem.

(That line lands quietly.)

MAYA: People have already noticed she’s not around.

Mr GUPTA: What are they saying?

SONIA: That she’s busy. *(pauses)* That she was never very settled.

FARAH: You’re saying that.

SONIA: I’m clarifying.

IMRAN: She didn’t want roots.

MAYA: She wanted comfort.

Mr GUPTA: And comfort doesn’t build anything.

(FARAH looks at them.)

FARAH: She built a life.

(Silence.)

FARAH: She wasn’t cruel. She wasn’t loud. She didn’t shame anyone.

MAYA: She didn’t have to.

IMRAN: Some people shame by existing.

(That lands hard.)

SONIA: This isn’t about her any more. It’s about us.

(A pause.)

SONIA: We did what we were meant to do.

Mr GUPTA: Exactly. Nothing wrong with expectations.

IMRAN: Order keeps things stable.

(MAYA nods.)

FARAH: So… that’s it then?

SONIA: That’s it.

FARAH: She just… goes?

SONIA: She chose to.

(FARAH absorbs that.)

(SONIA straightens the cushions. The same ones from Act One.)

SONIA: We’ll see who else comes along, is it right? Of course it is.

MAYA: They always do.

(Mr GUPTA checks the time.)

Mr GUPTA: Same time next Sunday?

SONIA: *(smiles)* Of course.

(They settle into their seats. The circle is complete.)

(FARAH looks once more at the empty chair, NIKKI’s chair.)

(several beats. She considers saying something.)

(She doesn’t.)

(Lights fade.)

Blackout